

BY
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NEAL
WINTERS

A Really, Really COLD CASE

I like to revisit Genesis and do so frequently. In some sense, the rest of the Bible is spent elaborating issues raised in that first book in the Bible.

Visiting Genesis is pleasurable and rewarding, but it does carry with it a burden. It is a book that requires more interpretation than may first appear to be the case. There are portions where the stories convey actual historical events, but there are others which are told for the purpose of conveying a particular truth in the most effective way. The problem arises because it is sometimes difficult to separate the accounts which are historical from those that are not. Sometimes we spend time defending a story's

historicity that might be better spent in discerning the truth it is meant to convey.

Cain and Abel—A Police Report?

Let us take the first part of the fourth chapter of Genesis as an example. It is the story of Cain killing Abel. If we look at this simply as a historical account like a police report, there are certain questions we can ask. For instance, where did Cain get his wife?

Folks—many of them non-Christians—can make a big deal out of this. They ask it with sort of an “Aha, I got you now” attitude. If you don't give them an answer, they feel they can cheat on their taxes, leave their lawns unmown, and still be as good as you are because you can't answer the question in the way they want you to.

To be fair, there are answers to this which would fit the historical interpretation and fit in with themes of the rest of Bible, but my best answer to those asking such a question is to say “That's not the point of the story” and then proceed to explain what that point is.

There is another sort of reader who likes to read the Bible very closely—with a microscope, in fact. They can look in the first two verses where it specifically mentions that Adam knew Eve and she conceived and bore Cain, but it doesn't repeat that exact sequence about Abel so there must have been something about Abel's birth that was different, and they focus their energies on that, while ignoring the main points of the story.

Whole Christian sects have been established with ambiguities such as these for a basis. We might laugh at this, but it's really not a laughing matter.

I could point to examples (but I won't) of sects which have taken nonstandard readings of a verse here and a verse there and have discarded thousands of years of the Judeo-Christian tradition while going off in their own idiosyncratic direction.

This is a risk of studying the Bible in isolation outside a tradition. One can take false turns from which it is hard to recover. We have a tendency to love our own ideas, and many a lone scholar has labored feverishly to light a candle while missing the bonfire right behind him. There are some cases in which charismatic individuals have convinced others to ignore the bonfire too, as they stare at a tiny candle.

There are some to whom the Bible becomes an idol. It is something you can take, utter a few words and magically come away with answers, the true answers, the only answers. What's more, there are those who set themselves up as a priest of the sacred mysteries. They are the sole interpreter and do their interpretation without listening to the knowledge of the scholars or the wisdom of the saints. If they are pastors, their "knowledge" can be used as a means of power over their flocks. This practice has become so ingrained in parts of the Christian culture that the people doing it don't realize that's what they are doing; or worse, they think it's normal.

Tradition, Experience and Reason

It is my personal opinion that the Bible was inspired by God, but it was written by people—or *a* people, I should say. I believe the Bible must be inter-

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preted using *tradition, experience* and *reason*. Before finally exploring the text I mentioned, I will briefly expand on these three items as a lens for interpreting Scripture.

Let me first mention *tradition*, because it is in some sense the most important. Tradition preceded the written word.

Tradition has gotten a lot of bad press, because in the eyes of some, former times should be thrown away and forgotten. But tradition is a mountain we can stand upon. We can see so much farther using the knowledge of those who came before than we could if we simply stood in the valley without that benefit. Using tradition as a tool for interpretation means we must only discard the opinions of previous ages if we are forced to. It is an anchor that keeps us from dashing ourselves to pieces against the rocks.

Next in line comes *experience*. Experience is, of course, the world's best teacher, and one may argue it is our first teacher. Let me say that as an aid to interpreting scripture, there is nothing quite like having a shared experience to put a fine point on one's understanding. Experience can bring meaning to a passage like nothing else.

Finally, let me address *reason*. The use of reason surprises some who believe that the Bible and reason have nothing to do with each other. I view the use of reason as simply taking advantage of the fact



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that the stories in the Bible are reasonable. The writers of the Bible were perhaps primitive in some ways, but they were not irrational. They thought long, hard and well.

So, after this overly long introduction, what do *tradition, experience* and *reason* have to say about the story of Cain and Abel? What is the story about?

Primary Themes of Cain and Abel's Story

It is a story told with some powerful strokes. The first and most important is: Cain was jealous of his brother and killed him. That is worth repeating: Cain was jealous of his brother and killed him.

The power of jealousy is so strong it can overcome even the power of brotherly love. This is an insight into the darkness of the human spirit that we need to meditate upon, and some of us need to do it daily.

For example, as I look into my own heart, when is my criticism of a brother, friend or co-worker justified, and when is it just jealousy?

The word "jealous" is never mentioned in the chapter, so how do I know jealousy was Cain's emotion? I know it is jealousy because I have experienced jealousy. Cain was human, I am human, and we both can experience jealousy.

Jealousy is touched upon in a number of other places in the Bible. We can think of the relationship between Joseph and his brothers. Much later we can cite the feelings Saul

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had toward David. Finally, we might ask whether it was jealousy that caused Judas to betray Jesus. (Read John 12:1-9 and consider the last possibility).

Another of the main themes of this story is Cain's reaction to his crime. Cain reacted just as his parents had when they ate of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. He covered it up—and God found out about it any way.

Here we can compare and contrast Cain's reaction to his sin and the way his parents reacted to theirs. God had told Adam and Eve beforehand not to eat of the fruit of the Tree, but he'd never issued an edict to Cain not to kill Abel. Regardless of this, Cain hid his crime. We can reason, therefore, that even though God had never told Cain not to kill his brother, he still knew it was wrong.

Much later in Genesis, Jacob's sons hide their selling of Joseph into slavery by faking his death, which is in turn blamed on a wild animal. Later still, in Second Samuel, King David hides his adultery with Bathsheba by having her husband Uriah the Hittite killed. In each of these cases, the sinner seeks to hide the sin. People sin, blame someone else and try to cover it up. We know it is true because we've experienced it ourselves.

The capstone to this story is God's reaction. How did God react to this first murder? Did he issue the death penalty? Was there an electrocution? Was there a lethal injection?

No. He sentenced Cain to live. Indeed, he put a mark on him so that no one would kill him. How are we to interpret this?

Here I would invoke tradition—and the Gospel—to interpret this as the action of God the Father. The Father is stern but merciful. He doesn't kill his child, but banishes him from his face. Sin has caused a



CAIN LEADS ABEL TO DEATH. BY JAMES TISSOT

greater alienation between the Father and his children. Later, after the Flood, when man has become so alienated from God that God repented of creating man, God institutes the death penalty. One might reason that God came to this decision reluctantly.

God's mercy is seen again when he merely scatters those who build the Tower of Babel and again when he spares Noah's family from the Flood and again when he spares Lot's family from Sodom and again when he sends Cyrus as a deliverer for Israel and finally when he sends Jesus as our Savior.

These things I've mentioned already are easily visible on the surface of the story of Cain and Abel. They are the main strokes. However, there are things in the story that are subtler, but are still woven through the entire Bible.

Subtle Themes in the Story

Besides "Where did Cain get his wife?" the question I've heard asked most frequently is "Why was Cain's sacrifice refused and his brother Abel's accepted?" The jealousy this engendered led to Cain's crime, and some attempt to use this to blame God for the crime.

The sacrifice was not accepted because the offering was sub par. God says this in the story, but why was Cain's offering sub par?

The answer—in my opinion—is there, but it is subtle. The story relates that Abel gave his very best, but it doesn't say the same about Cain. Cain was told he could do better next time. This was not acceptable to him. Instead he killed his brother.

The sin of Adam and Eve had caused death to enter the world, and the performance of blood offering was a reminder of the consequence of that sin.

I look at this story and wonder if the ancient author was paralleling Cain's murder of his brother with the same blood offering. It, too, was a consequence of sin.

God's sacrifice in order to clothe Adam and Eve had been an act of mercy, and while sacrifice is a reminder of the cost of sin, it is also a reminder of that mercy. The murder of a fellow human being, a brother, is no such reminder.

Christians believe this tradition of blood offering continues to the time of Jesus, when he himself was the final offering. Caiaphas the High Priest spilled Jesus' blood, much like Cain spilled Abel's. Jesus' only crime seemed to be that God had blessed his ministry while not blessing that of Caiaphas, as it were. In this case, it was Jesus' selflessness in the sacrifice of himself that earned our salvation rather than the action of the priest, and God's mercy is still the reason.

There is a bundle of threads passing through the story of Cain and Abel that are woven into the whole fabric of the Bible. They are colored with human nature, and when we examine the fabric produced we can see God's mercy.

The key in using the Bible as an aid to greater understanding of ourselves and our world is the interpretation. *Tradition, experience and reason* are proper tools in this interpretation.

It is my opinion that understanding our place in God's world is more important than ever as we've removed ourselves from his presence and wander even farther to the east of Eden. □

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